



Cambodian-American issues heard on the Hill

Sok Khemara

June 1, 2011

Cambodian-American representatives from various US states went before Congress last month, in an intensified lobbying effort to get representatives to understand the hardships and struggles faced by Cambodian immigrants today.

Cambodian immigrants who fled the Khmer Rouge, as well as their children, face myriad issues, from post-traumatic stress or poor health, to the threat of deportation or the prospect of a poor education.

Fifteen Cambodian-Americans traveled to Capitol Hill in Washington May 24 and May 25 to bring such issues to members of Congress through the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.

Judy Chu, a Democratic House representative from California and a Chinese-American, led the caucus.

As leader of the House Education and Labor Committee, she said she sees a number of hardships for Asian-Americans. Around 35 percent of Cambodian-Americans do not have a high school diploma, she said, along with 40 percent of Hmong and 30 percent of Lao immigrants.

Laura Richardson, a Democrat and House Representative for California, in Long Beach's 37th district, told VOA Khmer after a caucus meeting that Asian immigrants need awareness on health, education and legal issues.

“For me, the No. 1 [issue] would be to assist in the immigration and visa process,” she said. “Many people come here, and they feel they have to spend \$10,000 and get an attorney, and they are waiting and waiting to take advantage of it. And we need to make sure that the process is seamless and that it makes sense, and that people who want to come here and work and take care of their families, they should have the opportunity to do that, just like other people have.”

Cambodian-American immigrants across the US have complained in the past of a stringent visa process that can be confounding or expensive, leading some to neglect it altogether.

Kuoch Theanvy, executive director of Khmer Health Advocates, told the congressional caucus that the 300,000 Cambodian immigrants who arrived in the US in the 1980s face

health problems like diabetes, cancer, post-traumatic stress and hypertension.

Many of them lack cultural or legal understanding that would help them cope in the US, she said, while many of their illnesses are symptoms of their suffering and separation from their families.

She said afterward that some representatives have taken up the cause of Asian-Americans.

“We need to follow up [with them],” she said. That could include finding federal funding to help with Cambodian-American issues and having direct meetings with representatives.

Cambodian-American representatives at the caucus came from states across the US. Many of them spoke to VOA Khmer after their meetings.

Linath Lim, a Khmer Health Advocates member from California, told VOA Khmer that her community now has no projects to help Cambodians with their health issues.

“The US has no projects for our Cambodian people,” she said. “That’s why we’ve come today. We want them to know that we have urgent healthcare issues in the United States. We want them to solve the issues for us.”

Chan Hopson, executive director of the Khmer Parent Association, based in Long Beach, said Cambodians have shortened life expectancy, even in the US.

“If parents who have a chronic illness pass away, leaving their children to become orphans, those children will have no one to take care of them, nor will they grow up to continue a good education,” he said. “So this causes an extreme risk for people and our children.”

Sambo Ly, a KHA board member from Oakland, Calif., said money is needed for Khmer-language translators in hospitals and other programs to help Cambodians understand the health issues they face.

“Today, Cambodians see American doctors, but no one translates for them so that they understand how to take their medicine, or how to measure their blood pressure,” he said. Jacqueline Tevy, a 24-year-old student from Maryland, said she wanted congressional members to understand that “Cambodian issues are different from Thai and Vietnamese issues.”

“Cambodians have special problems that need a solution,” she said.

Among those problems is that of forced deportation, a US policy that sends non-legal immigrants back to their presumed home countries after they serve time for felonies in US prisons. Many of those who are deported have lived in the US for perhaps decades,

their parents having failed to secure them citizenship.

In such cases, deportation “is just like sending them to their deaths,” said Dani Morton, an activist from Seattle, Wash. “We want [Congress] to know that this is not justice for our people.”

Representative Xavier Becerra, a Democrat from California, said many of the pressures faced by Asian-American immigrant groups can be solved through immigration laws.

“As much as we want to have a job, have a good school for kids, have a good home, it’s tough when so many of our relatives and friends have to always wonder when the immigration law will treat them right,” he said. “And so immigration is something we should tackle soon, because if you do that it frees up a lot of these folks who were worried about so many things relating to their jobs or school.”